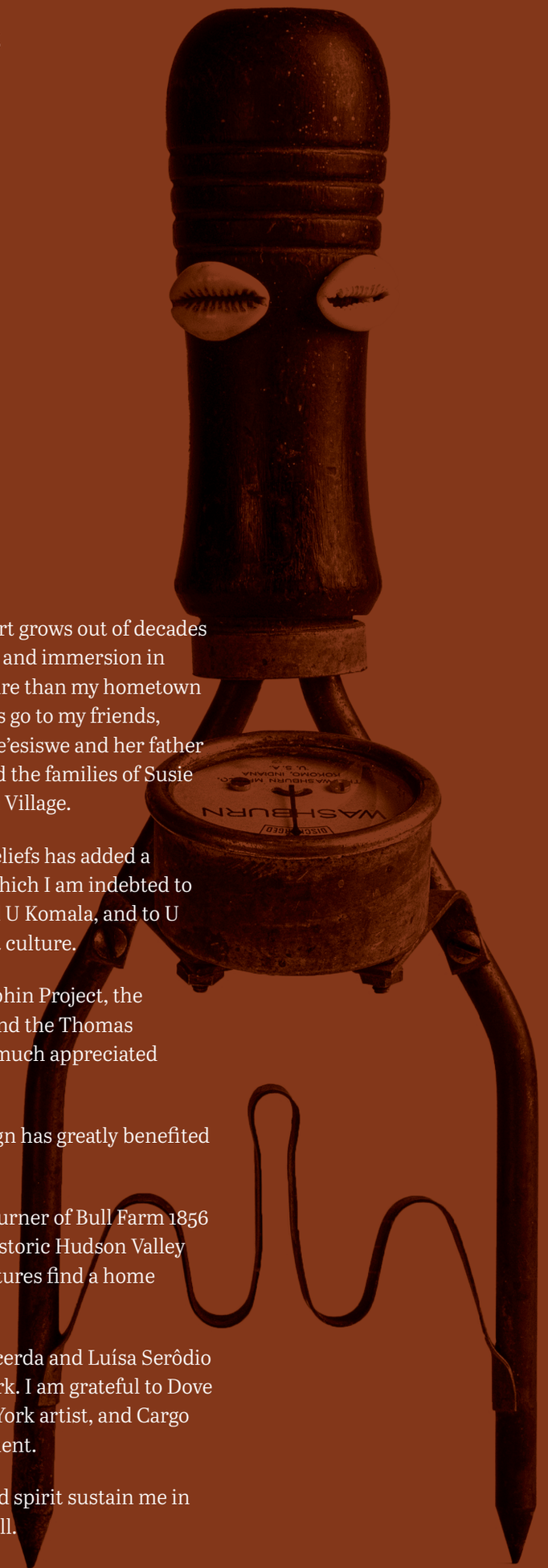
CARGO ART

SACRED RUST

SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



My ethnographic fantasy of Cargo Art grows out of decades of fieldwork in the Solomon Islands and immersion in village life, a world far closer to nature than my hometown of New York City. My deepest thanks go to my friends, especially the families of Anna Hane'esiswe and her father Chief Halumwane of Sa'a village, and the families of Susie Filali and Thomas Mahiki of Fanalei Village.

Later research on Burmese spirit beliefs has added a compelling twist to Cargo Art, for which I am indebted to my monk friends U Aggadhama and U Komala, and to U Man Sein for teaching me about Nat culture.

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José Mendes's creative graphic design has greatly benefited this catalog.

I am grateful to Mark and Simone Turner of Bull Farm 1856 for showcasing Cargo Art at their historic Hudson Valley exhibition space, where Cargo Creatures find a home alongside exceptional ethnic art.

Portuguese artist friends Teresa Lacerda and Luísa Serôdio have inspired and promoted my work. I am grateful to Dove Bradshaw—childhood friend, New York artist, and Cargo Art champion—for her encouragement.

My sister Annie Laurie's support and spirit sustain me in everything. My heartfelt thanks to all.

SACRED RUST: CARGO ART, AN IMAGINED REALITY

Sarah, South Malaita, 1979

Sarah Keene Meltzoff's Cargo Art exists as an imagined reality—a world constructed from decades of ethnographic observation yet wholly invented. Her work bridges ethnography, photography, and art. Across a lifetime of practice, she has explored cultural transformation and the human experience around the globe, merging fieldwork with visual storytelling and artistic interpretation.

She coined the term Cargo Art in 1984, the same year she joined University of Miami's marine school as a professor, exploring human-environment interactions. Cargo Art plays off cargo cults and the word *cargo* in Solomon Islands Pijin English.

Cargo is Pijin for the industrial world's manufactured goods, from metal fishhooks and spoons to cameras and clocks.

Cargo Cult is a term applied to movements among people attempting to overthrow or offset the social, political, and economic disparities of colonial rule. The Cargo Cult phenomenon sprang up on the heels of WWII across Oceania.

Moving beyond Found Objects and Assemblage (e.g. Picasso's bicycle seat bull; Max Ernst's insects), she invented a personal *Raw Vision* immersed in ethnic art motifs and ethnographic understanding.

ARTIST STATEMENT OF SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

Our family house was filled with Victorian furniture, books, and my father Stanley's paintings and props. Stanley Meltzoff was a prominent American illustrator of history and science who pioneered underwater fish painting. My mother Alice Forder was a stage actress in New York before WWII, who became a social worker concerned with social justice. Sister Annie Laurie responded to this unconventional household by becoming a poet-artist and yoga meditation teacher in Davis, California. She married Samuel Armistead, a professor of medieval Spanish folklore renowned for singing and preserving Sephardic ballads.

I spent my childhood climbing trees, sailing, and collecting butterflies, imagining becoming an explorer. I found this calling in ethnography, photography and Cargo Art. Gathering folk art and ethnographic objects began during my travels in traditional Mayan villages from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico to the Western Highlands of Guatemala while still an undergraduate at Connecticut College. Upon graduation, I won a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to live in Oceania for a year. Here, cargo cults and ethnic art drew me in. Taking up photography, I began recording disappearing village life among the rainforests and reefs.

Emerging from an animist understanding as a child that spirits inhabit objects as well as living things, I continuously find objects to forge power figures, imbuing them with Spirits from a pre-industrial landscape using cultural material collected during my ethnographic fieldwork.

Inside machine-driven society, I see anthropomorphic faces in everything from old tools to motorcycle parts, recognizing potential beings in objects uncovered in workshops, secondhand shops and flea markets. I repurpose cargo by transforming these representatives of industry into Cargo Art, combining them with traditional wealth objects and bits of wildlife, including New Guinea Highlands bride-wealth cowries; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—green turban sea snail operculum; vertebrae and skulls; or ancient Burmese beads.

Malaita, where I did early ethnography among former cannibals and dolphin hunters of the Solomon Islands, inspired me to play off Cargo Cult logic. I was motivated to make an imaginary alternative, but one that could have been a rational interaction with the inequities of colonialism.

Cargo Art, on the flip side, serves those of us who lead lives heavily laden with material goods yet relatively disconnected from real time spent in nature or getting to know different cultures. It expresses mourning our shores being swallowed by rising seas, rainforests being denuded by logging, and oceans swept by industrial fishing.

Cargo Art Creatures are conduits between industrial and natural worlds, anchoring spirits to Earth and Sea with humor and compassion.

As AI begins to predominate, Cargo Art's purpose has become more urgent as physical, handmade counterweights to digital disembodiment. Cargo Creatures are deeply relevant for preserving cultural memory of disappearing worlds while maintaining spiritual connection in an increasingly virtual age.

My primary ethnographic work is *Listening to Sea Lions: Currents of Change from Galapagos to Patagonia*. My Solomon Islands research produced *Custom Versus Civilization*, examining the juxtaposition of so-called "primitive" and industrial societies. Now, as an emeritus professor living in Lisbon, Cargo Art and Burmese ethnography are my focus.

Cargo Art has been exhibited from Miami and New Orleans to New York and Portugal.

CATALOG

01
MESSENGER OF THE WAVES (2022)
Dim.: 12 × 4 in. (30.0 × 10.0 cm)

Meter made in Kokomo, Indiana from the tool bench of early 20th century Oregon carpenter, Frank S.; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

02
RIDING THE WIND (2023)
Dim.: 10 × 7 in. (25.0 × 18.0 cm)

Handcrafted wooden-handled hammer treasured by an Oregon carpenter; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; Highlands cassowary feathers bound for a headdress.

03
CANNY (1995)
Dim.: 4.5 × 3 in. (11.0 × 8.0 cm)

Flattened tin can from Aldan fishing village, Galicia, Spain; New Guinea Highlands bamboo pig tally stick worn around the neck of the man who donated the pig to the feast; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

04
CARRYING VISIONS FROM THE LAND BENEATH THE SEA (2022)
Dim.: 6 × 4 in. (15.0 × 10.0 cm)

Flattened tin can from Northern Chilean desert settlement; limpet shells from beneath a cliff on a Portuguese beach.

05
MASK TO HIDE EMOTIONS (1993)
Dim.: 8 × 4 in. (20.0 × 10.0 cm)

Vintage Japanese gasmask found in a Kyoto temple flea market; Malaita, Solomon Islands seed pod from an ankle dance rattle; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; my childhood Chinese brass bell.

06
INTREPIDLY INTRIGUING (2005)
Dim.: 4.5 × 4.5 in. (11.0 × 11.0 cm)

Military Order of the Serpent, 1912, Atlantic City: a Supreme Convocation Medal among a sub-group of Spanish American War Veterans; handmade bell from herders in Burma; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

07
PLANE TRUTH (2002)
Dim.: 6.5 × 2.5 in. (16.0 × 6.0 cm)

Plane from an early 20th century Oregon carpenter, Frank S.; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

08
PINNING HOPES (2015)
Dim.: 5 × 2 in. (13.0 × 5.0 cm)

Giant California 1950s *imperdible*—Spanish safety pin; New Guinea Highlands cowrie, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

09
MINGLED DESTINIES OF PLANTS AND HUMANS (2023)
Dim.: 10 × 4 in. (25.0 × 10.0 cm)

Grapevine pruners from the 1930s, used in tending vineyards near Óbidos, Portugal; New Guinea Highlands cowrie, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

10
TRAVELER (2003)
Dim.: 16.0 × 6.5 in. (40.0 × 16.0 cm)

Impala 1950 hood ornament found by Cerro Lucía in Santiago Chile; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

11
PLAYFUL ERUPTIONS WITHOUT PERMISSION (2023)
Dim.: 3 × 4 in. (8.0 × 10.0 cm)

Beach lava found in Reykjavík while visiting my anthropologist friend, Gísli; antique metal beads collected in Rajasthan, India.

12
ALERT IN THE AI LANDSCAPE (2016)
Dim.: 2.5 × 5.5 in. (6.0 × 14.0 cm)

Clamping tool from early 20th century Oregon carpenter, Frank S.; operculum (sea snail's trap door) used in African magical practices, found in Berkeley's African flea market.

13
AT THE CROSSROADS (2009)
Dim.: 10 × 4 in. (25.0 × 10.0 cm)

Wooden block found as Caribbean flotsam at Tulum, Quintana Roo; welding bronze nozzle; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

14
SATIATED (1987)
Dim.: 14 × 4 in. (35.0 × 10.0 cm)

Trowel found while living in Key West; clays from the high desert of Northern Chile; Miami boot blacking; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

15
SLICING WIT (1998)
Dim.: 14 × 4 in. (35.0 × 10.0 cm)

Aluminum mid-century cheese slicer; dance rattle seed pod from Sa'a Village, South Malaita, Solomons; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

16
WONDERING WHAT TO COOK UP NEXT (2003)
Dim.: 5 × 2.5 in. (13.0 × 7.0 cm)

Cooking oil can found during lunch in a cantina along the shores of Salar de Uyuni, world's largest salt flat, Bolivia; dance rattle seed pod from Sa'a Village, South Malaita, Solomons; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

17
RAIN SHIFTING SHAPES (1986)
Dim.: 16 × 12 in. (40.0 × 30.0 cm)

Crushed vehicle part found in Miami; dog tooth worn at *sing-sings* in the Ramu River area of Papua New Guinea; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

18
PIONEER SPECIES (2023)
Dim.: 9 × 8 in. (23.0 × 20.0 cm)

Vanguard car ornament from the Standard Motor Company, which assembled vehicles in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand between 1948 and 1963, found in Chile; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

19
JUJU CRUXIFIX (1990)
Dim.: 25.5 × 12 in. (65.0 × 30.0 cm)

Grill found near my house on Grunt Bone Alley, Key West, Florida; rusted boat rigging from the Key West docks; foot of a mockingbird captured by Gumbo the Cat in Key West; expired American Express card from Giselle Dove, Trinidad student on my field course to New Orleans; amulet bundles and bone from a *mganga* (traditional healer) who I met in the hills of Pare, Tanzania; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

20
SHEER DELIGHT (2000)
Dim.: 12 × 4 in. (30.0 × 10.0 cm)

Pruners with yellow blades from Key West, Florida; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; *robo manole* dolphin tooth worn at feasts in Fanalei Village, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.

21
BRUSH WITH FATE (1989)
Dim.: 9 × 3 in. (23.0 × 8.0 cm)

Broom end washed ashore at Higgs Beach, Key West, Florida; clays from the altiplano of Northern Chile; rusted spark plug found along Miami River, Miami, Florida; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

22
TIME SKIPPING FORWARD AND BACK (1989)
Dim.: 10 × 9 in. (25.0 × 22.0 cm)

White buck shoe found while living on Grunt Bone Alley, Key West, Florida; cassowary quill nose ornament worn in the New Guinea Highlands; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

23
SEARCH FOR PRECEDENTS (1986)
Dim.: 8 × 8 in. (20.0 × 20.0 cm)

Motorcycle part from Longevity Team's John Long at his workshop along the Miami River; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

24
SOUL CATCHER (2000)
Dim.: 10 × 9 in. (25.0 × 23.0 cm)

Catcher's mask from the heyday of 20th century baseball in NYC; tiger cowries from Solomon Islands.

25
TRANSPOSING (1997)
Dim.: 19 × 4.5 in. (48.0 × 11.0 cm)

Branding iron found in Catalonia, Spain, the summer Neil Armstrong first moonwalked; New Guinea Highlands cowrie shells, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become traditional bridewealth; cassowary feathers from New Guinea Highlands *sing-sing* headdress; yellow spiral seed pod of a tree found in the Copiapo desert, Chile.

26
CLARION CALL (2003)
Dim.: 11 × 6 in. (28.0 × 15.0 cm)

Bugle used in Chin State, Western Burma, made in Raj India by Nadir Ali and Company in 1941, found at the Chin Lady's shop in Rangoon; New Guinea Highlands cowrie shells, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become traditional bridewealth.

27
NAVIGATING THE WORLD WE LIVE IN (2002)
Dim.: 4.5 × 4.5 in. (11.0 × 11.0 cm)

Round wooden four-sided mouse trap found in an attic by the Navesink River, New Jersey; *ra'a* dolphin teeth worn at feast dance in Fanalei, Solomon Islands; small sea snail operculums.

28
GUARDIAN SPIRIT (2001)
Dim.: 4 × 3 in. (10.0 × 8.0 cm)

Yale lock; shark tooth from longline fishermen in the Florida Keys; New Guinea Highlands cowrie shells, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become traditional bridewealth.

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